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Theory in Industrial Relations: Towards a Materialist Analysis

Analysis of the organised interrelationship between employers and the collective representatives of labour was once conducted overwhelmingly in pragmatic and empiricist terms; the subsequent elaboration of 'industrial relations theory' was firmly rooted in the harmonistic presuppositions of functionalist sociology. But in recent years this field of study has attracted a variety of more radical interpretations, and in particular has become an arena for a growing range of Marxist and neo-Marxist arguments. This paper explores the significance of such developments, raising in the process questions concerning both the nature of Marxism and the adequacy of the conventional category of industrial relations.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

The very term 'industrial relations' is indicative of the character of the subject which it denotes. It forms an area of study with no coherent theoretical or disciplinary rationale, but deriving from a directly practical concern with a range of 'problems' confronting employers, governments and their academic advisers in the pursuit of labour stability. On this pragmatic basis, research and teaching in industrial relations became established (often with employer and/or governmental sponsorship) in institutions of higher learning in the US and Britain. Doubtless the location reflected material factors: the existence of a 'labour problem' stemming from relatively strong and stable trade unionism, and a laisser-faire tradition inhibiting direct strategies of containment by the state. The acceptability of this new field within the framework of respectable academic endeavour, equally, may be related to factors specific to these countries: most notably, the theoretical sterility of much academic work in other disciplines ensured that a new and unashamedly atheoretical subject would not appear out of place.[1]

At first sight, the past two decades have witnessed a marked shift in orientation. Dunlop's pointed critique of his fellow-students - 'facts have outrun ideas. Integrating theory has lagged far behind expanding experience' -[2] attracted a ready response; so too did his proposal that the concept of an 'industrial relations system' might offer the theoretical centrepiece of a coherent and distinctive discipline. Why Dunlop's shoddily constructed essay should have assumed such seminal status is perhaps puzzling: undoubtedly he must have articulated an

extensive malaise within the industrial relations establishment. Possibly, with the decline of the post-war strike wave, American academics were less necessary to employers and governments in an immediate trouble-shooting role, and thus required a longer-term rationale for their existence; perhaps also, the influx of students with a range of social science backgrounds encouraged a search for a theoretical framework which would justify industrial relations academics to their colleagues in other disciplines. In any event, the 'theory' which was to become so widely and so rapidly embraced neatly combined the advantages of ready availability, academic acceptability, and complete compatibility with the existing focus of teaching and research.

Dunlop derived his model of the 'industrial relations system' explicitly from Parsons' delineation of the 'social system'. Arguably, he failed seriously to comprehend the Parsonian project; but it is clear that he drew from it a number of orientations - idealism, formalism, conservatism - very convient for the task of rationalising and legitimising a field of enquiry which had developed primarily to assist capital in ensuring the productive, predictable and profitable exploitation of labour. As has been argued:

> systems analysis offers an ideologically acceptable alternative to those who embrace the perspectives of the pragmatist but eschew his unsophisticated language and concepts. The selfsame problems of efficiency, practicality, constructive adaptation to change and the 'orderly' reform of industrial relations can be tackled in either framework. The principal concerns of Parsons' sociology parallel closely the chief worries of those in authority in industry.(3)

In their search for intellectual legitimacy, industrial relations academics borrowed in other ways (though equally uncritically) from current social science orthodoxy. The notion of 'institutionalisation of conflict' - elaborately theorised by Coser in his commentary on Simmel's Conflict(4) - has been fundamental to a whole series of post-war exercises in the sociology of industrial relations: Dubin's much-quoted contribution to the symposium Industrial Conflict;(5) the diagnosis of Kerr and his associates of an irresistible development of 'pluralistic industrialism' whereby workers' resistance 'gets organized, channeled, controlled';(6) or Dahrendorf's thesis of 'the

institutional isolation of industry and industrial conflict', highly influential in Britain in the 1960s.[7] The basic theme of all these analyses - that conflict of interest between workers and employers, once openly articulated by representative institutions whose legitimacy is conceded, can be relatively easily contained and accommodated - also underlies the most famous of all predictions in industrial relations: Ross and Hartman's 'withering away of the strike'.[8]

In Britain, resistance to explicit theory in industrial relations proved more tenacious than in the US; only in the late 1960s (at a time when research and teaching in the subject were expanding rapidly) did the 'need for theory' become a regular cry in the journals of the trade. While some writers have embraced the elaborate cybernetic models of recent 'systems thinking', the dominant framework has become a notion of 'industrial relations pluralism' often imprecise in its assumptions, heterogeneous in its lines of argument and varied in its derivations. The intellectual origins of British industrial relations pluralism include Dunlop, Chamberlain and other writers on American labour relations; political scientists such as Schumpeter and Dahl; Durkheimian sociology as construed by the Parsonian school; and the diffuse doctrines of Fabianism.[9]

The Anglo-American tradition, it is evident, is both complex and internally differentiated. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern an underlying paradigm which comprises three key assumptions. The first involves a naturalistic conception of interests: the fundamental actors in the 'industrial relations system' are a multiplicity of individuals and groups; larger collectivities are recognised only in the form of organisations and alliances established by these primary actors. The second core characteristic is an empiricist conception of power: those determinations of social action are alone meaningful and significant which involve the actual or potential mobilisation of sanctions to influence identifiable decisions. A third premise (more overt in some writers than others) reflects an ethnocentric view of the nature and purpose of trade unionism: from a restricted conception of workers' legitimate interests stems a virtual apotheosis of collective bargaining and a definition of unions as almost by nature economistic, accommodative and hierarchical. These three presuppositions lead without difficulty to a view of industrial relations as a set of stable institutions through which the 'inputs' of divergent goals and interests are routinely transformed into a

'web of rules' underwriting the smooth progress of capitalist production.

The dominance of these assumptions within academic approaches to industrial relations is easy to understand once they are located historically. First, the ideological climate of the cold war created intense pressures for academics to develop an explicitly anti-Marixst explanatory framework (pressures assisted by the vulgarisation and stultification of most that passed for Marxist thinking during the Stalinist era). This climate affected social analysis in general, but may well have been reinforced for those students of industrial relations who required respectibility not only within their own academic institutions but also in the eyes of the companies and governments whom they served. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the material context in which academic industrial relations spread its roots was that of expanding post-war capitalism and the hegemony of US imperialism: an exceptionally favourable basis thus existed for the 'positive-sum' resolution of conflicts between capital and organised labour. The model of 'pluralistic industrialism' was a product of the same conjuncture which gave birth to such constructs as 'the affluent society', 'the end of ideology' and the 'common value system'. Theory assumed the timelessness of conditions which were historically specific.

The material context has indeed altered dramatically since the first two post-war decades. Recession and the profits squeeze have reduced the margin for concession in wage bargaining at the same time as price inflation has heightened workers' expectations; employers' rationalisation strategies have brought job control issues - typically less susceptible to compromise - firmly onto the agenda; state initiatives and controls have challenged traditional assumptions of the autonomy of industrial relations institutions; new forms of social and political instability have seemingly been replicated in an enhanced radicalism of goals and methods in labour struggles. The complacent theories and formulae of post-war industrial relations academics have accordingly been thrown into some disarray. Concurrently, detente in great power politics has been reflected in a certain loosening of cold-war constraints in intellectual life. Thus in industrial relations analysis, as in the social sciences generally, there has been a growing tendency to seek theoretical insights in more radical - and more specifically, Marxist - approaches.

MARXISM AND 'INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS': THE TRADITIONAL DETACHMENT

'"Industrial relations", the consecrated euphemism for the permanent conflict, now acute, now subdued, between capital and labour': (10) Miliband's dismissive comment typifies Marxist reactions to an area of study which appeared both manipulative and narrow-minded. For the post-war American left, most work in industrial relations followed the example of managerial 'cow-sociology' in assisting the repressive strategies of the industrially dominant. Wright Mills' denunciation still rings eloquent:

> The new practicality leads to new images of social science - and of social scientists. New institutions have arisen in which this illiberal practicality is installed: industrial relations centers, research bureaus of universities, new research branches of corporation, air force and government. (11)

To the charge of managerialism, Marxist writers have subsequently added a critique of the subject's intellectual foundations. Understanding is obstructed, not advanced, by positing a (relatively) autonomous sphere of social relations involving bargaining and 'rule-making' between unions and employers; the processes of 'job regulation' can be adequately comprehended only as part of an analysis, on the one hand of the dynamics of production and accumulation, on the other of the broader pattern of social and political relations. (12) For Marxists, the activities of employers and unions are to be construed in terms of such concepts as relations of production and class struggle; the term 'industrial relations' is at worst vacuous and at best incoherent.

Yet even if the typical mode of academic industrial relations analysis (let alone pretensions of its disciplinary status) is dismissed, the empirical realities which the label mystifies remain of considerable practical and theoretical importance to Marxists. Whatever the difficulties of defining Marxism (and some are considered later), there are clearly two basic assumptions which necessitate a reformulation of the industrial relations problematic. The first is that capitalist social relations of production reflect and reproduce a structured antagonism of interests between capital and labour. The second is that capitalism simultaneously organises workers collectively (since the capitalist labour process is essentially collective in character), and hence generates the material basis for effective resistance

to capital and the priorities of the capitalist mode of production. What is conventionally studied as industrial relations may thus be conceived as a fetishised presentation of the class struggle and the various forms in which it is (at least temporarily) contained, fragmented and routinised. Thus one might expect Marxists to have made substantial attempts, not merely to criticise, but also to re-analyse, re-interpret and re-apply what is produced under the name of industrial relations. There is, in other words, an obvious need for Marxist theory in 'industrial relations'.(13)

It is surprising how limited were the attempts, in much of the post-war period, to develop a systematic alternative framework at the level of the concrete reality with which academic industrial relations is concerned. This may in part reflect the lack of detailed support for such a theorisation within the classic Marxian literature. Marx and Engels were not working and writing in a context of routinised trade unionism and institutionalised collective bargaining; their comments on these themes represent in the main responses to immediate issues rather than intensive analysis. The insights to be gained directly from the 'blue books' are therefore limited. And inclination to develop original Marxist theory in this area was almost certainly inhibited by the tendency - in an era of post-war class collaboration and compromise - to 'write off' the organised working class as a potential agency of revolution. This context encouraged a variety of developments within western Marxism which despite radical differences were at one in assigning at best minor significance to working-class organisation and action. Examples are the popularity of forms of academicised structuralism in which human agency is virtually excluded; voluntarist and substitutionist emphases on the party or the combat group; and attempts to locate the motor of world revolution in 'marginal' social groups or the 'third world'. Implicitly or explicitly, all such approaches accepted much of the argument of conventional industrial relations analysts: that industrial struggle in the developed west had become securely contained and institutionalised.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: TOWARDS CONVERGENCE?

The challenges to stable institutionalisation which in the past decade have forced reappraisals within academic industrial relations have, predictably, brought a shift of focus in the work of many Marxists. Recently there have been significant moves towards a materialist analysis which assigns approp-

riate weight to workers' collective organisation and struggles and to the processes of institutional mediation of labour conflicts: exploring their character, sources and internal contradictions. Yet paradoxically, recent changes - both in the material relationships studied as 'industrial relations' and in their analysis and theorisation - have in many respects accentuated the difficulties of characterising theory in general, and Marxist theory in particular, within the field of industrial relations.

In part this reflects the notorious ambiguities of that much reified construct, 'Marxism'. Commenting on the incompleteness of Marx's achievement, Rosa Luxemburg argued that

> the most valuable of all his teachings, the materialist-dialectical interpretation of history, presents itself to us as nothing more than a method of investigation, as a few inspired leading thoughts, which offer us glimpses into an entirely new world, which open to us endless perspectives of independent activity, which wing our spirits for bold flights into unexplored regions.(14)

The differentiation process noted by Korsch - 'there exist, both nationally and internationally, very different theoretical systems and practical movements which go by the name of Marxism' -(15) has escalated considerably in the subsequent half-century. Recent decades have seen the rise of a variety of 'new lefts'; the tolerance of theoretical heterodoxy within official Communist parties; and the growing acceptability of at least elements of Marxist analysis within academic social science. There is a substantial and fundamental divergence between, say, efforts to construct on the one hand a phenomenological Marxism from the epistemology and ontology of the 'young Marx', and on the other a structuralist Marxism which abstracts the categories of Capital from human practice and historical process. Less momentous points of division acquire heightened significance when embodied in the conflicts between self-declared Marxist parties and groupuscules.(16) Concurrently, the belated sanctification of Marx as one of the 'founding fathers of sociology' - a guide to the understanding of new problems of crisis, conflict and change which post-war orthodoxy was not designed to explicate - raises acutely the questions whether, and how, Marxism constitutes a self-contained and distinctive body of theory, concepts and analysis. Is it possible - or helpful -

to assert a rigid demarcation between Marxist and 'bourgeois' theoretical practice, or is there a continuum of approaches each to a greater or lesser extent 'marxisant'?(17)

In the context of a specific field of study such as 'industrial relations', these problems are compounded by yet another: that of differentiation of levels of analysis in terms of generality and concreteness. If Marxism attains its essential distinctiveness as a general theory of capitalist production and class relations, can it directly and exclusively generate an adequate theorisation at the specific level of contemporary management-employee relations? Or is it possible for Marxist (neo-Marxist?) analysis to utilise certain of the concepts and theories of 'bourgeois' social science without succumbing to shallow eclecticism?

It could be argued that the integrity of Marxist analysis is indeed inversely related to the specificity of the concrete issues which concern the student of 'industrial relations'. It is precisely those researchers who descend from the higher levels of generality and abstraction - who accept the challenge of relating the general to the specific, the concrete to the abstract - who face problems of analytical innovation which seem to require various forms of 'revisionism'. What is it that identifies Huw Beynon's Working for Ford(18) as a Marxist work? (If indeed it is: for one reviewer 'it objectively functions as part of the left reformist wing of institutional sociology by its partial failure to become Marxist sociology'.) Does Kern and Schumann's much cited study(19) represent a development of, or a withdrawal from, Marxism? Can the members (some? most? all?) of the Groupe de Sociologie du Travail be regarded as Marxist scholars? It is difficult to believe that such questions can be answered helpfully, if at all.

Perhaps the problem could be restated. It seems impossible to specify a clearly differentiated and homogeneous set of Marxist theories or explanations which systematically elucidate relations between unions and employers, workers and managers. Nor do Marxist researchers bring to the study of such relations a distinctive methodology: if many British Marxists regard the elaborate quantitative analysis of, say, strike statistics as unduly positivistic, and many Germans reject conventional survey techniques as authoritarian, their French or Italian counterparts reveal few such scruples. Ultimately, it could be argued, the major contribution of Marxists

has been as much in the questions asked as in the answers given or the methods of their attainment. It is the framework of what is taken for granted and what is regarded as problematic that most clearly differentiates Marxists from conventional 'industrial relations' analysts. In principle, 'bourgeois' researchers might raise similar questions: but a background in Marxian political economy creates a natural sensitivity to structures, problems and processes traditionally neglected within orthodox analysis - at least until a changed material context forces them importunately into view.

THREE SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARXIST ANALYSIS

It is possible here to explore three such areas of enquiry: the dynamics of capital accumulation; the nature of the working class; and the changing forms of state involvement in relations between labour and capital. Recent work in these areas clearly demonstrates the major theoretical contribution of Marxist analysis; but indicates at the same time the heterogeneity of interpretations (and hence the acuteness of controversy among Marxists) and also points of convergence with non- (or semi-) Marxist approaches.

It is a notable paradox that while the dynamics of capital accumulation are a necessary starting-point of any distinctively Marxist discussion of class structure and class struggle within capitalism, there has traditionally been very little attention to the specific agencies and strategies of capital in its relations with labour. In contrast, bourgeois writers have long emphasised the historic significance of the so-called 'managerial revolution', have erected a grandiose pseudo-discipline of 'management science', and more recently (at least in Britain) have sought to develop a theory of industrial relations in which managerial policies and initiative constitute the key determinant. The fundamental weakness of such approaches is that typically they assume or imply an exaggerated autonomy of managerial strategy from the structural dynamics of commodity production and capital accumulation. An important contribution of recent Marxist writing has thus been to confront the theses of managerialism with an analysis which explicitly emphasises the linkages involved.(20)

Criticism of managerialism has converged with more general developments in the field of political economy. The breakdown of the relative stability of post-war capitalism has stimulated vigorous reassessment of some

of the basic principles of Marxian economics, with much attention (often highly abstract) to the categories of value and price and to the famous 'transformation problem', and with considerable debate over the character and conditions of Marx's law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.[21] Of great importance is the growing willingness to link such theoretical discussion to the analysis of the current dynamics of the class struggle. On the one hand, workers' collective resistance to capital has itself been theorised as a source of crises of profitability; on the other (though most fruitfully in conjunction with the latter perspective), specific managerial strategies towards labour are related to the uneven development of patterns and problems of accumulation.

One aspect of this emergent reconstruction and revitalisation of Marxist economics is a growing attention to the labour process. It is ironical that conventional writers on industrial relations have developed often sophisticated discussions of 'job regulation' and 'systems of rules' without any apparent recognition that the elaborate procedural and institutional superstructure on which they focus has its foundation in the sphere of production. Marx's discussion of the labour process - somewhat neglected in much post-war Marxist economic literature - has received renewed attention following the appearance of Braverman's influential study.[22] It has accordingly become clear that sensitivity to the specific character of the capitalist labour process - to its function as the motor of valorisation and accumulation, to its dependence on a necessaruly coercive system of control and surveillance - provides a basis for elucidating theoretical problems which bourgeois approaches can scarcely begin to formulate. Thus such a focus illuminates the concreteness and inherently antagonistic nature of what orthodox industrial relations writers term 'managerial relations'; and, more generally, exposes the class character of the managerial function.[23] It recognises that the inherent dynamism of the capitalist mode of production is reflected in a constant revolutionising of the labour process, which in turn threatens the stability of institutionalised forms of conflict resolution.[24] Of crucial importance, it helps deflate the ideology of 'technology' as a neutral, autonomous and irresistible force, revealing the technical organisation of production as an element in the struggle for control over production and thus demonstrating the need to locate materially and historically the contemporary experience of 'rationalisation'.[25] In addition, attention to the labour process underlines the need to analyse occupational changes within the working class in relation to the material basis of production rather than by reference to such

epiphenomena as 'white collars'.(26)

This latter consideration connects closely with the central theme of a second major area of recent Marxist analysis: the patterns of divergence and differentiation within the working class. The basic postulate of the unity of the working class (in even if not for itself) - a unity constituted from a common relationship of antagonistic class interests as against capital and the bourgeoisie - implies a level of analysis distinct from that involved in specifying the immediately conceived structure of interests of particular groups of workers. Marx himself devoted only limited attention to hierarchical divisions within the working class, which in his view rested 'in part on pure illusion or, to say the least, on distinctions that have long since ceased to be real'; and whose material basis would be further eroded by the spread of the detail division of labour and the real subsumption of labour to capital. Yet it is clear that while some traditional differentiations have disappeared, others have retained their significance and yet others have arisen. To analyse the nature and significance of such internal divisions and variations is at the same time to explore a number of general questions of great theoretical importance: what is the working class? how are its boundaries identified? what meaning (if any) can be attributed to the notion of 'middle class' within Marxist theory?

Much discussion of these issues in post-war sociology has been cast within a 'vulgar Weberian' framework. Typical features have been a subjectivist focus (studies of 'self-assigned class'); an emphasis on life-styles or consumption patterns to the neglect of the sphere of production; or analysis in terms of abstracted notions of 'authority' and purely market-related aspects of occupational differentiation. While the more sensitive of such studies illuminate important areas of social relations traditionally neglected by Marxists, the fundamental weakness of neo-Weberian approaches is their failure to accommodate the production of surplus value as an integral component of the processes under examination.

In recent years there have been important attempts to interpret the changing composition and structure of the working class, and the implications for collective labour organisation and action, against the background of Marx's analysis of the production of absolute and relative surplus value.(27) One major theme has been the evaluation of the significance of occupational strata and sectors to which sociological orthodoxy has attributed key importance:

most notably, 'white collar' and 'service' labour. While certain Marxists have sought legitimacy for identifying such groups as a 'new middle class',[28] the predominant concern has been to reject as obfuscatory such designations, and to emphasise the heterogeneity of the occupational changes which have occurred, while at the same time locating these developments within the more general dynamics of capitalist production.[29] Of particular relevance for students of 'industrial relations' is the analysis of contradictory aspects in the position of certain occupational groups whose significance is currently increasing: what Carchedi terms 'those agents who, while not owning the means of production, perform the global function of capital and the function of the collective worker'. Such a focus offers considerable potential for the theoretical understanding of the extent and boundaries of collective organisation among 'new' occupational groups, and the type of goals and strategies which are collectively pursued; and this in turn can assist in comprehending collective action within the 'traditional' working class.[30]

In this latter context, recent years have seen an engagement between Marxist economists and conventional accounts of labour market segmentation within the manual working class. In the 1950s, American labour economists and industrial relations writers[31] pointed to the development within major firms of job hierarchies in which recruitment to higher positions was made internally, and outward mobility was inhibited by the company-specific nature of workers' experience and expertise. The early accounts of 'neo-feudalism' in employment structures were essentially descriptivist, involving little significant theoretical advance on nineteenth-century notions of non-competing groups. Subsequent attempts - that of Doeringer and Piore[32] being the best known - to characterise the American economy as a whole in terms of 'labour market dualism' were also weak in developing theoretical explanations of the patterns identified.

Recent work by Marxist (and other 'radical') theorists has had two main objectives: to elucidate forms of segmentation in national labour (power) markets which diverge from those in the US; and to inform the specific analysis of market differentiation with a historical understanding of the dynamics of capitalist production. The basic premise is that the structure of labour (power) markets must be comprehended as the outcome of a complex dialectic between the unevenness of capitalist development (reflected in divergent tendencies among industries, regions and indeed nations); consequential var-

iations in employer strategies towards labour; and patterns of worker organisation and resistance (which may themselves predominantly involve the pursuit and defence of sectional advantages).[33]

The general issue of labour (power) market structure assumes especial significance in relation to the position and struggles of two pre-eminently 'secondary labour market' groups: women and black or migrant workers. In both cases, the heterogeneity of approaches within radical and Marxist analysis - indeed the intensity and often acrimony of current debates - requires little emphasis. Among issues of contention may be noted: how far the specificity of the oppression and of strategies for liberation of women and blacks can be theorised in terms of general processes of marginality and disadvantage; the relative importance of deliberately discriminatory practices, patterns of institutionalised racism or sexism, and more fundamental socio-economic processes and structures; the extent to which the main dynamics of 'secondary' status are to be located within the operation of labour (power) markets themselves or externally (for example, historical and contemporary imperialist relationships; 'patriarchy' and the role of women within social reproduction and domestic labour); the direct utility to capital of the specific forms of subordination imposed on women, blacks and migrants (and hence the extent to which their current struggles are necessarily anti-capitalist).[34]

As far as the theme of this paper is concerned, the significance of the expanding literature on these issues is twofold. On the one hand it has explored lacunae in Marxian political economy, effectively combatting a traditional 'vulgar' tendency to reduce all social and economic oppression to a simple polarity of classes. In particular, Marxist feminists have exposed the economistic neglect of all forms of social production within capitalism except capitalist production itself: they have taken seriously Marx's dictum that 'the maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital', elaborating some of the implications which Marx himself failed to pursue.[35] On the other hand, these theoretical debates (perhaps rather: the practical struggles of women and black workers) have obliged students of industrial relations to attend seriously to aspects of work, wages and collectivism which have traditionally been largely ignored.[36] More crucially, this has in turn revealed the inadequacy of the 'industrial relations' perspective itself: for the 'industrial relations' of black workers reflect international structures of the exploit-

ation of labour power by capital, and are not located merely within the framework of employer-employee institutions in a single national 'industrial relations system'; while women's 'industrial relations' cannot be meaningfully analysed except in terms of the highly complex interaction between institutions of wage-labour and more general processes of social production and reproduction.

The notion of a (relatively) autononous 'industrial relations system' is thrown further into question by the pervasive role increasingly performed by state institutions in the conduct of union-employer relations. Such developments create obvious scope for Marxist interpretations, for Marxist critics of industrial relations orthodoxy have long insisted that there is an elaborate dialectic between capitalist production, class struggle and state power which cannot be grasped by a mechanical dichotomy between the 'economic' and the 'political'. From this perspective, an absence of direct and systematic state intervention in the organised relationships between labour and capital (the traditional pattern in Britain and North America) should be viewed as itself a form of involvement: for the 'abstention' of law and government permits the working out within 'industrial relations' of a particular balance of class forces in civil society. As a corollary, a more actively interventionist role is to be interpreted as a change in the form rather than the reality of state implication in the capital-labour relation.

The detailed contribution of recent Marxist analysis to what might be termed a 'political economy of industrial relations' is difficult to characterise. The relationship between state power and capitalist production is one of the most contentious issues in contemporary Marxist controversy: partly because, as Miliband has noted, 'the available classical writings are simply silent or extremely perfunctory over major issues of politics and political theory';(37) partly because of the overwhelming and immediate political significance of even relatively abstract theoretical debates;(38) partly because it is here that Marxist structuralists have engaged most violently with what are denounced as 'historicist' or 'positivist-empiricist' interpretations.(39) Without attempting here to enter into this controversy, it may be noted that the quasi-functionalist tendency within structuralist theories of the state (involving, for example, the unproblematic specification of trade unions among the 'ideological state apparatuses') makes it extremely difficult to theorise the changing forms of interaction of employers, unions, governments and legislation. (Indeed even to raise such questions may be

denounced as evidence of a faulty problematic).

By contrast, other Marxists have taken such developments as their main focus of analysis. One major issue has been the interpretation of the rapid growth of the state sector within many western economies (thus in the role of government as an employer, as a direct actor within 'industrial relations'). As against conventional accounts of the 'welfare state' as the outcome of essentially 'political' decision-making processes, Marxists have explored the intimate connections between state employment and relations of production within contemporary capitalism. Thus it can be shown that much state expenditure contributes indirectly to the expansion of surplus value through providing the necessary infrastructure for advanced monopoly capitalism and through facilitating the reproduction of labour power; while the remainder predominantly helps underwrite the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production itself through what has been termed the 'warfare-welfare state'.(40) While such analyses are at their weakest when confronted with the substantial international variations in both the extent and the rate of growth in state expenditure,(41) they contribute powerfully to an understanding both of the relative social and economic stability of the first two post-war decades, and of the subsequent cycle of crises.

Against the background of a combined theory of the internal contradictions of state employment and expenditure as a source of 'fiscal crisis', and of the origins of the crisis of profitability within the development of monopoly capital itself, the dynamics of 'interventionism in industrial relations' are readily apparent. What is less directly explicable is the specific selection of strategies for state intervention: the imposition of wage controls, the enactment of legislative restraints on worker militancy and union action, the promotion of 'safe' channels of employee representation (e.g. works councils), the co-optation of unions within governmental policy-making, or the various possible combinations of these methods. A genuinely materialist analysis recognises that such strategies are not adequately explicable merely in terms of the internal workings of 'the political'; that the emergent instititutional linkages and tensions between employers, unions and the various agencies of state power must be located concretely within the dynamics and contradictions of capitalist production in its current conjuncture. But the precise characterisation of this conjuncture, and the detailed elucidation of the multi-faceted relationship

between state and 'industrial relations', receive only the most limited guidance from a generalised commitment to Marxist theory.

MARXISM, TRADE UNIONISM - AND SOME POINTS IN CONCLUSION

It has already been suggested that many of the problems which affect the development of theory in industrial relations are, in part at least, problems of integrating different levels of generality. The state of 'industrial relations' or of class struggle cannot be simply 'read off' from a generalised characterisation of the economic and political conjuncture, but equally cannot be understood except against this background. What is at issue is the specificity of institutions and processes of mediation which are in some respects distinctive in each nation, industry, company and individual workplace; and which can alter in their effects over time. The contrasts in patterns of development in the various west European countries in the past decade (to make a relatively restricted geographical and temporal comparison) must be grasped as in large measure the outcome of differences at the level of mediation.

Trade unions themselves are obviously among the most crucial of such mediating institutions. The distinctive traditions of their historical development in each country - often reflecting the long superseded material context of their origins and early growth - help determine the degree to which union organisation encompasses the working class, the internal structural delineations within the movement, the nature of the linkages between unions, the types of attachment to political ideologies and parties, the orientation towards collective bargaining as a dominant mode of activity, the extent of internal democracy and the forms of articulation between membership and leadership. Such factors in turn have a profound bearing on each of the areas of analysis discussed previously: the extent to which unions intensify or help damp down crises of profitability and struggles over the labour process; their contribution to the unity or the internal hierarchisation and division of the working class; their accommodation or resistance to different strategies of state intervention. Unless the mediating role of unions can be adequately analysed and theorised, there will be severe limits to the value of the most impressive advances of theory in the areas discussed above.

It is therefore noteworthy how modest is a distinctive Marxist contribution to the understanding of trade unionism. The 'classic' Marxist

writers in their discussions of union organisation and action were largely concerned to generate recipes for intervention and leadership in immediate working-class struggles, rather than to develop sensitive, systematic and generalisable theory. (Hence ironically there is considerable evidence of a mirror-image of the pragmatism of more orthodox commentators.) Accordingly, the terms in which Marxists have typically analysed unionism have been largely derivative. Lenin's notion of 'economism' - one of the most commonly repeated concepts in Marxist trade union literature - derived primarily from his reading of the Webbs' Industrial Democracy. The reactive and accommodative character of stable, 'pure-and-simple' unionism was stressed as strongly by such authors as Commons, Perlman and Hoxie (though their evaluations were of course very different) as by Marxists - whose detailed familiarity with actual trade union practice was often far less. Marxist commentaries on the relationships between leaders and led owe much to Michels and the 'elitist' school of political analysis. In particular, the familiar dichotomy between 'rank and file' (a conventional military metaphor) and 'trade union bureaucracy' (an almost ritual incantation popularised by the Red International of Labour Unions) normally reflects mere sloganising rather than serious theoretical intent.(42) Finally, the notion of corporatism - much in vogue as a characterisation of the growing intimacy of employer-union-state relations - lacks either analytical clarity or obvious Marxist credentials.

The readiness of Marxists to embrace such categories and characterisations reflects the fact that all denote - though in a partial and mechanical manner - genuine tendencies within trade union development. The key question must therefore be: does Marxist theory offer the possibility of a distinctive and more scientific understanding of these tendencies than can be achieved through borrowed concepts and propositions? One obvious path to analytical insight is through an appreciation of the historically contingent character of what conventional commentators often treat as 'iron laws' of trade union development. A major component of the interface between antagonistic class forces, trade unions embody a contradictory potential which consigns on their organisation and action a persistent dualism: a dualism moreover which derives not merely from the internal dynamics of unionism but from the material interests and relations of production which they mediate. The dominance of a particular tendency (militancy or acquiescence, democracy or oligarchy...) should thus be interpreted as the determinate, but to some degree always provisional, outcome of a particular combination of circumstances.

Sensitivity to such dualism is uncommon. Most Marxist writing on trade unionism displays one of two opposing forms of one-sidedness. Either overwhelming weight is placed on the determinant effect of the logic of capitalist development, depicting as inevitable and uncontradictory the subordination of the working class to bourgeois hegemony and the integration of working-class organisations within the priorities of the capitalist state. Or else the contradictions within capitalism are treated as a source of almost unqualified openness for working-class collective action, spontaneous worker resistance to capital being viewed as a virtually undetermined agency of economic and political instability and transformation. The one approach effectively denies the potential or significance of conscious human (and specifically working-class) practice in the face of the structural determinations of capital; while in the other, the scope for working-class creativity is treated as unlimited regardless of the material context.

Both tendencies find partial legitimation within the corpus of classic Marxism; each on its own is clearly inadequate. Marx's theoretical stature derives essentially from the creative tension between his dual emphasis on the structural determinacy of capitalist production and the historical agency of the working class in struggle. The interpenetration of these contradictory facets of the social reality of capitalism demands sensitivity, insight and qualitative richness from the analyst of trade unionism. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the advances made on the existing tentative and exploratory essays in the theoretical understanding of unionism - in its manifold variations over time and place - will provide a critical test of the vitality and fertility of contemporary Marxism.

Yet it also remains true (as was suggested previously) that such advances are likely to display considerable parallelism with other interpretations - provided only that these are sufficiently attuned to the complex and contradictory nature of current mediations between labour capital - even though derived from very different theoretical traditions. But in admitting the possibility of a certain convergence between Marxism and academic orthodoxy in the analysis of institutions and processes of mediation, is it necessary to concede the autonomy of 'industrial relations' as an area of material reality and intellectual endeavour? It is indeed correct to insist that this is a level of social relations which partially follow their own (contradictory) laws of development, and which accordingly require serious analysis in their own

right. But today, more than ever before, it is fallacious to exaggerate the autonomy of the processes of institutional mediation of the capital-labour antagonism. On the contrary: in an epoch of crisis the interconnections between the various levels and elements of the social formation (national and international capitals and their various fractions; state and civil society; material and ideological relations), whose superficial independence once encouraged attempts to develop a self-contained theory of the 'industrial relations system', are now increasingly transparent.(43)

Notes

(1) It is noteworthy that specialist industrial relations departments are uncommon in European universities, with their far stronger commitment to theory; and indeed, literal equivalents of the term 'industrial relations' have an alien ring in most European languages.

(2) J.T.Dunlop, Industrial Relations Systems, New York, Holt, 1958, p.vi.

(3) Richard Hyman and Bob Fryer, 'Trade Unions: Sociology and Political Economy' in McKinlay, Processing People, London, Holt-Blond, 1975, p.165

(4) L.A.Coser, The Functionsof Social Conflict, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956

(5) R.Dubin, 'Constructive Aspects of Industrial Conflict' in Kornhauser et.al., Industrial Conflict, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1954

(6) C.Kerr et.al., Industrialism and Industrial Man, London, Heinemann, 1962, p. 233

(7) R.Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959. A best-seller in British academic circles, Dahrendorf's book made little impact in Germany where the original version appeared two years earlier: an indication, perhaps, of the theoretical vacuum then existing in British industrial sociology.

(8) A.M.Ross and P.T.Hartman, Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict, New York, Wiley, 1960. It is only fair to note that in this work Ross and Hartman presented the 'withering away of the strike' thesis in a far more guarded and qualified form than many subsequent writers.

(9) The Fabian background to industrial relations analysis in Britain helps explain the - at first sight paradoxical - trend from sympathetic interest in the labour movement to a managerialist focus. The pioneering studies of the Webbs displayed both a commitment to what they identified as the goals of unionism, and an insistence on the virtues of industrial stability, the rationality of bureaucratic routine, and the selfishness of proletarian class strategies. More recent writers with a similar political and intellectual background to the Webbs, in a period of shop-floor worker resistance to the common bureaucratic control of management and union hierarchies, have identified naturally with the goals of 'order' as against 'anarchy'. This trend is explored in more detail in Richard Hyman, 'Pluralism', Procedural Consensus and Collective Bargaining', British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. 16, No. 1 (March 1978). A certain parallel in the development of industrial

relations studies in the United States is discussed by George Strauss and Peter Feuille, 'Industrial Relations Research: a Critical Analysis', Industrial Relations, Vol. 17, No. 3 (October 1978).

(10) Ralph Miliband, The State in Capitalist Society, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969, p. 80.

(11) C.Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination, New York, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 95.

(12) See for example Richard Hyman, Industrial Relations: a Marxist Introduction, London, Macmillan, 1975, Ch.1.

(13) This is not to suggest the desirability or possibility of a Marxist theory of industrial relations. To argue thus would be to accept the theoretical coherence of 'industrial relations' as an area of analysis: to endorse the material and theoretical autonomy of institutionalised management-union relations.

(14) 'Stagnation and Progress of Marxism' (1903) in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, New York, Pathfinder, 1970, p. 107.

(15) Karl Korsch, 'Why I am a Marxist' (1935) in Three Essays on Marxism, London, Pluto Press, 1971, p. 60.

(16) Two factors have contributed to the distinctive form of such differentiations in Britain. Firstly, the traditional weakness of Marxism within the labour movement, and in particular the relative insignificance of Communist organisation, has allowed a greater detachment between theoretical controversy and organised political division than in continental Europe. Secondly, the problem of language has led to a curious periodisation of theoretical development: for example major writings of Lukâcs and Gramsci, of the Frankfurt School, and of the French structuralists have been published in English only in the past decade; while among the works of Marx himself, the Grundrisse and the Resultate have been available only in the 1970s. Theories and concepts emerge as the arcane possessions of a polyglot minority, assume on translation a rapid vogue, but are usually soon displaced by a different cult.

(17) 'Moi, je ne suis pas marxiste': Marx's famous rejoinder is still a powerful caution against attempts to systematise his writings into a body of dogma. It is perhaps significant that most attempts to define Marxism are more convincing in characterising what it is not rather than what it is. What is at issue is not the acceptance of Marx's specific analyses and predictions (which after a century cannot but require extensive revision); Lukâcs exaggerated, but no more than this, in arguing that one could 'dismiss all of Marx's theses in toto' without renouncing Marxism. But neither is Marxism (as Lukâcs went on to propose) primarily a question of method: efforts to formulate Marxism as methodology are typically either trite or circular, or else fail adequately

to differentiate Marxism from other approaches. To posit Marxism as tradition (as Edward Thompson has suggested) is also unsatisfactory: a tradition is identifiable only retrospectively, and offers no adequate orientation towards new problems and situations. Yet it is even more unacceptable to regard Marxism as a resource: to assume, in Thompson's words that 'all human culture is a supermarket in which we may shop around as we choose'. To believe that particular Marxian ideas can be wrenched out of context to assist explanation of a specific current problem, or can be combined promiscuously with other arguments from Comte, Durkheim or Weber, is to abandon any notion of Marxism as a coherent totality. The difficulty stems partly from the fact that while Marx's work possesses a genuine unity it is nevertheless incomplete and internally differentiated (indeed at times contradictory). The lack of a clear basis for a strategy which avoids dogmatism on the one hand, eclecticism on the other, is in part also a reflection of the paradox of 'armchair Marxism'. Marxist theory cannot be adequately defined and constituted through academic contemplation: 'all mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice ...'.

(18) Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973.

(19) H.Kern and M.Schumann, Industriearbeit und Arbeiterbewußtsein, Frankfurt, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1970.

(20) For example Theo Nichols, Ownership, Control and Ideology, London Allen and Unwin, 1969; and Robin Blackburn, 'The New Capitalism', in Anderson and Blackburn, Towards Socialism, London, Fontana, 1965.

(21) For an extensive - though necessarily partisan - survey of the British literature see Ben Fine and Laurence Harris, 'Controversial Issues in Marxist Economic Theory' in Miliband and Saville, Socialist Register 1976, London, Merlin, 1976. Continuing debates can be followed in the pages of New Left Review and of the Conference of Socialist Economists Bulletin (published since 1977 as Capital and Class).

(22) Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, New York, Monthly Review, 1974. In Britain there has been a tendency - in line with a certain onesidedness in Braverman's analysis - for writers who have 'rediscovered' the labour process to fetishise the concept: seeking in effect to reduce capital accumulation to the labour process, and thus neglecting the interdependent operation of the valorisation process. This criticism is developed by Tony Cutler, 'The Romance of "Labour"', Economy and Society, Vol. 7, No. 1 (February 1978); Tony Elger, 'Valorisation and "Deskilling"', Capital and Class, No. 7 (Spring 1979).

(23) An important though excessively formalistic analysis is provided by G.Carchedi, 'On the Economic Identification of the New Middle Class' and 'Reproduction of Social Classes at the Level of Production Relations', Economy and Society, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 and 4 (February and November 1975).

(24) This forms one of the central themes of Andrew L.Friedman's study, Industry and Labour: Class Struggle at Work and Monopoly Capitalism, London, Macmillan, 1977.

(25) See for example Braverman, Part II; Ernest Mandel, Late Capitalism, NLB, 1975, Ch. 16; CSE Pamphlet No.1, The Labour Process and Class Strategies, 1976. Particularly important are the German compilations which have appeared roughly annually since 1972: Otto Jacobi et al., Gewerkschaften und Klassenkampf, Frankfurt, Fischer, 1972 to 1975 and Gewerkschaftspolitik in der Krise, Berlin, Rotbuch, 1978; and Rainer Duhm and Ulrich Mückenberger, Krise und Gegenwehr and Arbeitskampf im Krisenalltag, Berlin, Rotbuch, 1975 and 1977.

(26) Carchedi's analysis has been particularly influential among British Marxists; and see also Terry Johnson, 'What is to be Known? The Structural Determination of Social Class', Economy and Society, Vol. 6, No. 1, March 1977.

(27) In particular, Parts III - V of Volume 1 of Capital.

(28) See Martin Nicolaus, 'Proletariat and Middle Class in Marx', Studies on the Left, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January-February 1967) and Paul Walton, 'From Surplus Value to Surplus Theories', Social Research, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Winter 1970); also the exchange between the two in Walton and Hall, Situating Marx, London, Human Context Books, n.d. (1972). Both draw primarily on the Theories of Surplus Value which Marx himself, of course, never completed for publication.

(29) Many attempts have been made to analyse these developments in terms of Marx's somewhat ambiguous distinction between productive and unproductive labour. Despite the undoubted theoretical importance of this controversy, the degree of abstraction involved limits its relevance for the understanding of the organisation, strategies and struggles of particular collectivities within the working class.

(30) For a survey of recent debates on the significance of occupational change for collective organisation and action see Richard Hyman, 'Occupational Structure, Collective Organisation and Industrial Militancy' in Crouch and Pizzorno, The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe since 1968, Vol. 2, London, Macmillan, 1978.

(31) The extensive involvement of labour economists in the development of academic industrial relations in the US contrasts with their far more limited role in Britain.

(32) Peter B.Doeringer and Michael J.Piore, Internal Labor Markets and Manpower Analysis, Lexington, D.C. Heath, 1971

(33) A good example of American attempts to radicalise 'dual labour market' analysis is Richard C.Edwards et al., Labor Market Segmentation, Lexington, D.C.Heath, 1975. The varying endeavours of European Marxists to incorporate trade union action within the theory of labour (power) market structure are

exemplified by Massimo Paci, Mercato del laboro e classi sociali in Italia, Bologna, il Mulino, 1973; Richard Herding, Job Control and Union Structure, Rotterdam, Rotterdam U.P., 1972; Friedman, op.cit.; Jill Rubery, 'Structured Labour Markets, Worker Organisation and Low Pay', Cambridge Journal of Economics, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March 1978)

(34) Any selection of references would be partial and idiosyncratic. In the US, the Review of Radical Political Economics is a forum for many of these controversies. In Britain - in addition to the sources mentioned in Note 21 - it is possible to cite the journal Race and Class and, for a range of Marxist and marxisant approaches, Diana Leonard Barker and Sheila Allen, Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage, London, Longman, 1976.

(35) One consequence of such work is to demonstrate important difficulties involving Marx's treatment of the value of labour power and hence the labour theory of value itself: see Veronica Beechey, 'Some Notes on Female Wage Labour in Capitalist Production', Capital and Class, No. 3 (Autumn 1977).

(36) The 'invisibility' of women in most industrial sociology - as in most labour history - has often been noted; see for example Richard Brown, 'Women as Employees', in Barker and Allen, op.cit.

(37) Ralph Miliband, Marxism and Politics, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1977, p.2.

(38) Criticism or justification of the emergent political strategy of the Communist Parties - eventually graced with the label 'Eurocommunism' - provides the practical point of reference for many of the theoretical controversies; others revolve around the detailed political perspectives of particular leftist groups.

(39) The most notable example being Nicos Poulantzas, Political Power and Social Classes, London, NLB, 1973.

(40) James O'Connor, The Fiscal Crisis of the State, New York, St.Martin's 1973. There are interesting affinities in the analysis developed by Claus Offe, Strukturprobleme des kapitalistischen Staates, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1972.

(41) It could reasonably be argued that such variations might be explicated by combining Marxist interpretations with more conventional political theories of state expenditure.

(42) See Richard Hyman, 'The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism', Capital and Class, No. 8 (Summer 1979).

(43) Because of the declining margin of autonomy within any given element or level of this complex totality, the scope for a theory of 'industrial relations' will necessarily diminish - whatever advances may be made in theory in industrial relations. The owl of Minerva?